

Tasteful office trends

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Business attire has been getting more relaxed over the years.

It seems, more often than not these days, the once accepted dress code at work for Monday through Thursday has morphed into business casual, and that Casual Fridays have become more like Anything Goes Fridays.

Not surprisingly, men and women on the West Coast tend to head to the office dressed more casually than their Eastern counterparts.

The question now is how casual is too casual? What is business casual, anyway? What's appropriate and what belongs on the What Were They Thinking page?

A less rigid dress code was supposed to make the workday more comfortable. Instead, with the old rules tossed aside, more workers are in a state of dress-distress. Business casual can be subject to wide interpretation and some even wilder ensembles.

How many of us have had to endure a colleague's less-than-businesslike outfit? The halter top, the low-riding jeans and the peek-a-boo panties for her, and the tight "Rock On!" muscle-shirt and ripped New Kids on the Block jeans for him.

Business casual does not mean dressing down and out. It does mean dressing professionally, looking relaxed yet neat and pulled together.

As my friend Mihaela Ciocan, president of ImagePro, an image consulting firm in Vancouver, aptly states, "Business casual is simply a relaxed version of traditional business attire. The easiest way to avoid confusion is to keep in mind that it is business first and casual second. It does not mean that we can sacrifice professionalism for the sake of comfort."

So what's not appropriate? For women: shorts, tight Sharon Stone skirts that ride halfway up the thigh, miniskirts, skorts, tube tops, tops that reveal bare shoulders, sundresses, beach dresses and spaghetti-strap dresses. Also on the list are sequins, velvets and shimmery fabrics that look flammable. Why are they in your closet, anyway?

As for cleavage -- well, let's just say that business casual is not a licence for putting yourself "out there." In general, clothing that reveals too much cleavage, back, chest, midriff or undergarment is out.



CREDIT: photo Fred Lee

Ania Piwko of Liz Bell Models styles a dressy casual look with Lauren by Ralph Lauren pinstripe shirt and Lauren mint white pants, accessorized with a Fossil mustard yellow satchel and Circa Joan and David brown buckled shoes.

For men, the tight or stained T-shirt, shirts with pictures, logos or loud graphics, sweatshirts and workout clothing are a no-no.

In addition, ditch the torn and ratty jeans, capri pants, leather pants, as well as that Hawaiian shirt you picked up on your last vacation.

As far as footwear goes for both genders, Doc Martens, athletic shoes, stiletto heels, flip-flops, sandals, hiking boots, slippers -- all are inappropriate workplace shoes, no matter who the designer, the comfort or the price.

Generally, business casual for men implies a tie but that isn't mandatory. Khakis (no pleats, please) with a long-sleeved shirt (pressed, of course) or polo top are popular with loafers, oxfords or deck shoes with matching leather belt (no white tube socks, pretty please); sweaters and turtlenecks, a sports jacket and pants are also acceptable.

For women, it's a dress, pantsuit or tailored separates, knee-length skirt and blouse, or slacks and blouse, knit sweaters, twin sets with flats or modest heels.

Dress for success.

If your workplace does not have a dress policy, key rules to consider when putting your casual clothes forward include:

- If you normally wear it to the beach, bars/clubs, cocktail party or gala, don't wear it to the office.
- Take a good look in the mirror before you leave the house -- if you are questioning whether an item of clothing is appropriate for the office, it more often than not isn't. Trust your instincts.
- It's better to be overdressed than underdressed.
- Don't dress for the job you have, dress for the job you want. Look to senior staff for guidance.
- If you're in a senior position or a position of authority, be a fashion plate and not a fashion faux pas. Others are watching and taking note.

Clothing for appropriate office wear provided courtesy of The Bay Downtown and styled by Tara Parker. Makeup is courtesy of NARS at The Bay.

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